

foreword by Nathifa Greene

Craig Leonard

Aesthetics after Marcuse

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CRAIG LEONARD

FOREWORD BY NATHIFA GREENE

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Foreword

I am happy I accepted the invitation to write this foreword. There is much to consider, for readers who are primarily interested in Herbert Marcuse, as a sole figure, as well as those who are mainly interested in theories of art or the Frankfurt School. Scholars will find a historically grounded discussion of various aspects of the ideas that Marcuse developed, and implications that link to broader concerns. The interpretations of artistic movements and the meaning of art are careful engagements with Marcuse, as well as his interlocutors in dialectical historical materialism and Frankfurt School critiques of capitalism. But there are also implications that extend further, tracing the analyses of key themes.

I will mention at the outset that I am not an expert in Marcuse, and my research areas are not limited to Frankfurt School critiques of political economy and culture. I do believe that the appeal of this text to scholars whose primary areas of research are related, such as myself, is a strength. I will confess that I become very quickly bored with intense discussions of scholarly arcana, which do have their place; this is just a reference to my scholarly temperament, in William James's sense of

the term (and I will leave it to those who prefer arcana more than I do to determine whether Marcuse would be tender- or tough-minded, according to James).

Reading this text, it is easy to imagine how the insights on art in Marcuse could also be helpful to scholars in many fields, and not only to specialists on Marcuse—even as there is much to consider here for those whose theoretical concerns are more narrowly defined. My appreciation for the author's insights on Marcuse in this text stem from our shared interests and many enjoyable conversations about habit, and scholarly analyses of habits in wide-ranging discussions across epistemology, existential phenomenology, and social theory. Although our institutional affiliations are very different, the treatment of habit in defamiliarization, according to Marcuse, is only one indication of the reasons that our conversations are so enjoyable—and reasons that are far less surprising than our institutional affiliations might initially suggest. The implications of these ideas will be of interest to readers whose scholarly concerns may be as narrowly technical as the existential-phenomenological structure of lived experience, or as broad as the questions of dialectical materialist historiography, as well as the more likely interlocutors in Frankfurt School critical theory.

Depending on the interests that a reader brings to this text, certain moments may stand out and create further connections to intellectual lineages, connecting Marcuse in ways that one would expect, as well as links that are more unexpected and thought provoking. *Uncommon Sense* is in the lineage of texts that are more commonly read in Western aesthetic theory, recalling poetics in Plato and Aristotle, as well as the *sensus communis* in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Some of these themes

may also seem to be unlikely pairings, as in the discussion of habituation in Marcuse alongside Peirce and treatments of habit in American Pragmatism. The treatment of instinct also situates Marcuse in dialogue with interlocutors who may seem unlikely, at first glance, from a cursory sense of where Marcuse might fit in the trajectory of European ideas about art in the twentieth century. Scholars interested in Henri Bergson would note that Marcuse discusses instinct in ways that often recall Bergson. And, although the popularity of Bergson and the extent of the “Bergson boom” before the First World War may be lost on contemporary readers, instinct was a concept that moved from scholarly discourses into everyday language, much like concepts developed by Freud—which may also be understood in European intellectual history as a descendant of Bergsonian instinct.

Freudian interpretations of instinct also suggest how this discussion of Marcuse also links to further themes, which Marcuse did not consider. For example, it is remarkable how psychoanalytic interpretations of drives, and sexual drives in particular, became a proxy for political discussions of violence in the mid-twentieth century, after the Second World War. Leonard suggests an opening onto other ways of interpreting the myopic limitations in Marcuse, treating these as more than simple ethnocentrism. If ethnocentrism is understood as a confinement to European authors, the history of Europe, and Western intellectual traditions, then this problem would be resolved by including more authors, and attention to colonialism beyond Europe. But there is more than the mere inclusion of topics and issues that are linked to race, gender, and colonial forms of difference.

Leonard rejects the misinterpretations of defamiliarization and anti-art that attribute idealism to Marcuse—which is frequently the pathway to discussions of Eurocentric ethnocentrism in Marxist and Hegelian historiography. On this note, Sylvia Wynter—who is cited in this text—is indispensable for further reading. Wynter’s essay “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory” describes how critical analyses of capitalism are often limited, analyzing symptoms or structures instead of the actual problems that need to be addressed. Marcuse’s notion of *anti-art* is an example of a critique that mistakes the map for the territory, in Wynter’s sense. Marcuse is concerned with the alienating effects of capitalism, the instrumental reduction and use of human beings, and the ideological problems in societies that are formed around capitalist economies and the modern liberal state. Critiques of such concepts and social practices are certainly necessary, as maps. And it remains important to note that Marcuse fails to consider these maps. But mistaking the map for the territory, in Wynter’s sense, is much more than a failure to include ideas or examples or authors that should be included.

On one conceptual map, the consolidation of Europe into a distinct geographical and historical “West” is an artifact of the Cold War. But scholars who are mindful of European colonialism would also note the Berlin Africa Conference in 1884–1885, as another significant moment of political integration that unified Europe, across national borders, and the mechanized forms of dehumanization and genocidal violence in colonies, which prefigured the outbreak of war within Europe in 1914 and 1939. The lineage that Wynter identifies as the reclassification of Man—as separate and with dominion over

the natural world, and in contrast to human Others—occurred at key moments when the West institutionalized itself into a geocentric center of the universe. Leonard shows how Marcuse is situated in discussions both within and beyond the Frankfurt School, with insights on various themes, including technology, instinct, habituation, and the social dimensions of capitalist political economy. In this way, the nuanced discussions of artistic movements and intellectual lineages beyond those that Marcuse considered, such as Caribbean Surrealism, are more than mere inclusions of non-European texts or traditions. The actual and more fundamental problem is the reclassification of Man in terms that would support settler-colonial rule, to build concepts of Western civilization in terms of a subhuman Other. Therefore, in Wynter's terms, Marcuse is working with a partial and distorted reproduction of a section of the map that has been mistaken for the territory.

What stands out most, for me, is that art is a material practice that remains engaged with materials throughout—art is not a mere chimera, or a relatively unimportant proxy for another aspect of political economy, interchangeable with any other social phenomenon in a superstructure of capitalism. I am writing this introduction on unceded Piscataway land, not a mile from a market where enslaved human beings were bought and sold, and a harbor where human beings would be trafficked further south. From this perspective, the concepts and political structures under scrutiny in dialectical materialism—such as the capitalist notions of market, or property—are very clearly the result of settler colonial dispossession of land, and the flesh and anguish of the violence that is required to transform human beings into a property valuation—the whole human being first,

before the later refinement of buying and selling labor, valued in terms of money as markets became more industrialized.

After reading this text, I am left with the sense that there are implications that Marcuse only suggests but could not fulfill, by retaining a sense of the material in social practices, including art, and at every stage in dialectical analyses of epistemic and political structures that situate individual and collective experience. But this is more than a mere demonstration of limits with Marcuse's frame of reference. It is also an invitation to provide more robust interpretations and conceptual tools, as in those that have been developed in radical Black critiques of racial capitalism and anti-colonial movements—as well as the intersections of these—in art and intellectual history.

Nathifa Greene

July 2021

1 ART IN THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL SOCIETY

This book argues for the contemporary relevance of the aesthetic theory of Herbert Marcuse—an original member of the Frankfurt School and outspoken advocate for the New Left¹—while also identifying and responding to his philosophical limits. I aspire to this end by placing him in dialogue with the remarkable thinking of Sylvia Wynter, whose work formally and conceptually stretches his predominantly European and patrilineal intellectual framework—while still retaining his aesthetic theory’s fundamental characteristics—toward a human dimension requiring decolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and counter-poetic perspectives.² Both Marcuse and Wynter were influenced by Marxism and Surrealism, placing aesthetics at the center of their sociopolitical philosophies.³ Where Marcuse was drawn to the European Surrealism led by André Breton, Wynter’s approach was informed by the Négritude movement.⁴ As such, I believe Wynter’s thought offers a critical perspective on Marcuse’s aesthetics in a comparable yet contemporary way to what the Négritude movement provided to Surrealism and Marxism in the 1930s. As much as this book is a defense

of Marcuse's aesthetics it is also a test of his claims that "art preserves and transcends its class character. And transcends it, not toward a realm of mere fiction and fantasy, but toward a universe of concrete possibilities."⁵

In the first four chapters I analyze Marcuse's primary argument that *art is political* through its refusal to operate according to the repressive rationality that establishes and maintains relationships dictated by advanced capitalism. Such an analysis focuses on several key terms. First, I consider Marcuse's various uses of *anti-art*, which functions as a window into understanding his position on the political character of artistic autonomy. Second, at the center of artistic autonomy (a problematic term that warrants scrutiny) is *defamiliarization*, which is the aesthetic technique that sparks the development of what Marcuse refers to as "radical sensibility"⁶—and what I am calling *uncommon sense*. Third, based on this argument, I reconsider the effects of the art historical category of institutional critique—defined as a range of artistic strategies that bring to light "the tension between the theoretical self-understanding of the institution of art and its actual practice of operation"⁷—by way of a Marcusean form of *instinctual critique* that demonstrates care rooted "in compassion, in our sense for the suffering of others"⁸ through its reliance on the defamiliarization of habit.

When Marcuse speaks of the instincts, he implies their manipulation through *habitualization*.⁹ This point is significant, since his emphasis on the instincts is the basis for his multilayered aesthetic theory that assembles psychoanalytic, philosophical, economic, and sociological perspectives into a unified critique of what he labels in *One-Dimensional Man* (1965) as *technological rationality*. Marcuse defines this concept

not only in terms of its economic framework, which shapes “thought and behavior that develop in the execution of the technological project,”¹⁰ but also with respect to *technē* (technique; skill) in its general association to all forms of human activity. As a result, Marcuse argues that resistance to technological rationality must happen on at least three interconnected fronts: (1) the reorganization of the production process away from human and environmental exploitation; (2) the reshaping of work away from alienation and competition; and (3) the transformation of individual needs away from the capitalistic “gratification that guarantees the repressive reproduction of the commodity world.”¹¹ Broadly speaking, while all three of these requirements fall within economic and political spheres, through the subject of *needs*, the last is centered within the cultural. Nevertheless, whenever Marcuse addresses economic and political crises, he always returns to the importance of the cultural sphere as part of a total program of critical refusal. At the core of his critique of culture, it is the *aesthetic dimension*—the most profound expression of freedom—which serves both as framework and platform for “the subversion of experience and individual consciousness [and for] a radical revolution of the system of needs and gratifications.”¹²

THE GREAT REFUSAL REVISITED

On March 8, 1967, Marcuse gave a public lecture at the School of Visual Arts in New York titled “Art in the One-Dimensional Society” (figure 1.1), which was reprinted in *Arts Magazine* in May of the same year.¹³ In his lecture, Marcuse alludes to Theodor W. Adorno’s assertion that it is impossible to write

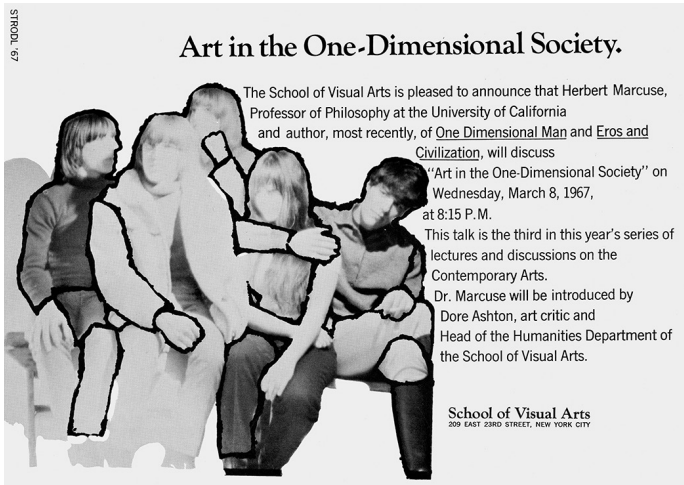


Figure 1.1

“Art in the One-Dimensional Society” (poster), March 8, 1967. Courtesy of School of Visual Arts, New York, NY. © Dan Strodl

poetry after Auschwitz. In a *dialectical* fashion (in contrast to a rhetorical one)¹⁴ Adorno was not stating that poetry can no longer be written, but after the horrors of Auschwitz *not* writing poetry succumbs to its antithesis: barbarism.¹⁵ Marcuse would repeat but expand on Adorno’s position in an informal “Letter to the Chicago Surrealists,” where he writes: “In the third chapter of *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, I implied an affirmative answer to the question whether after Auschwitz and Vietnam, art is still possible. The ideas and images of liberation still have a home in art, and they are still akin to the aesthetic form of estrangement.”¹⁶ Concisely, I replace Marcuse’s descriptive phrase “the aesthetic form of estrangement” with a single word: defamiliarization.

The central role that defamiliarization plays in Marcuse's aesthetic theory has been overlooked. For Marcuse, it not only identifies artistic value (that is, art versus anti-art), but also serves as a practical technique that links the aesthetic dimension with the political transformation of the individual, which "can perhaps best be illuminated by discussing the change in the social use of instinctual energy."¹⁷ Accordingly, it is an openness and attention to direct experiences with defamiliarization that transforms an artistic technique into a sociopolitical counter-technique through its subversion of habitualized common sense. As such, the defamiliarizing capacity of art, "which must take a variety of forms,"¹⁸ performs a significant part in resisting the technological rationality that undergirds advanced capitalism through "the active, constitutive role of the senses in shaping reason, that is to say, in shaping the categories under which the world is ordered, experienced, changed."¹⁹ Defamiliarization operates as a "technique of liberation"²⁰ (to borrow an expression from Drucilla Cornell) by reawakening a latent radical sensibility that is indirectly political through its ability to reimagine the limits imposed by habitualized common sense. In this way, defamiliarization counters repressive facticity²¹ by initiating "an awakening (*anamnesis*) of memory, remembrance of things lost, consciousness of what was and what could have been [which] may provide the (artificial) basis for the remembrance of freedom in the totality of oppression."²² *Anamnesis* (meaning "to recollect or remember") does not newly create radical sensibility through defamiliarization, but instead is renewed by it.

As a result, aesthetics plays a pivotal role in what Marcuse called "the Great Refusal" by recognizing and subverting the

rationalized, one-dimensional common sense that makes radically alternative perspectives seem mistaken or even irrational. Through art's *dynamic autonomy* in relation to the everyday, aesthetics contributes to the Great Refusal by participating in "the desperate struggle to rejuvenate the ailing spirit."²³ Admittedly, autonomy is as fraught a concept as it is reviled by the artistic Left as a historic remnant of bourgeois liberalism.²⁴ I argue, however, that dynamic autonomy should not be equated with *pure autonomy* understood in terms of a detached and monadic containment, but as alterity in relation to ever-changing socio-historical conditions. Where pure autonomy refers to a world of objects isolated from society, dynamic autonomy refers to actions, offerings, and relations that are attentively uncommon relative to the social determinations of their emergence. Fundamentally, following Marcuse, "by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis-à-vis the given social relations. In its autonomy art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience."²⁵

Historically, the source of the term Great Refusal has been attributed to Breton's *The Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1929);²⁶ however, in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) Marcuse refers to its origin in Alfred North Whitehead's series of lectures *Science and the Modern World* (1926).²⁷ It is noteworthy that Marcuse references both Breton and Whitehead in successive paragraphs (and Adorno in the paragraph succeeding those) to defend an "uncompromising adherence to the strict truth-value of the imagination [which] comprehends reality more fully."²⁸ Marcuse's notion of the Great Refusal connects Surrealism's adherence to the ultimate freedom of the imagination to Whitehead's

belief in the arbitrariness of rationality. Moreover, his fusion of Breton and Whitehead foregrounds *dialectics*, which offers, in Whitehead's words, "the realm of alternative suggestions, whose foothold in actuality transcends each actual occasion. The real relevance of untrue propositions for each actual occasion is disclosed by art, romance, and by criticism in reference to ideals."²⁹ These elements—imagination, rationality, and dialectics—buttress Marcuse's aesthetic theory.

It is useful to briefly draw out the connection between Breton and Whitehead. The attribution of the term Great Refusal to Breton is an amalgam of inexact translations of two parallel phrases in *The Second Surrealist Manifesto*. The first is "total revolt" (*la révolte absolue*) as a "tenet of complete insubordination";³⁰ the second is "utter refusal" (*un refus total*) to accept "the cancer of the mind which consists of thinking all too sadly that certain things 'are,' while others . . . 'are not.'"³¹ The characteristics of the "Surrealist attitude" (*l'esprit surréaliste*) model Marcuse's position on the sociopolitical value of artistic refusal, which is reflected in what Breton called the "first article" of Surrealism's charter: "a deliberate will to deal the coup de grace to that which one calls *common sense*."³² In Whitehead, in comparison, there are two uses of the term (uncapitalized) in separate lectures, although they impart the same intention. One use speaks of the power of poetic abstraction; the other follows the Romantic view of nature as offering a poetic alternative to scientific rationality, depicting rationality's arbitrariness in general and establishing familiarity in opposition to fact. In both cases, Whitehead's "great refusal" is presented as an innate characteristic of rationality itself, which is to argue on the contrary that there are alternative forms of rationality

(poetic, scientific, technological, etc.) contradicting a singular and definitive system of truth. Moreover, Whitehead's understanding of aesthetic experience is comparable to Marcuse's in two ways: first, in Whitehead's emphasis of art's reason based on "determinate negation"³³ and, second, in Whitehead's concept of the "actual occasion"³⁴ of experience with its emphasis on *care*—meaning both concern (to care about) and solicitude (to care for).³⁵ As Whitehead states, "The occasion as subject has a 'concern' for the object. And the 'concern' at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject, with an affective tone drawn from this object and directed toward it. With this interpretation, the subject–object relation is the fundamental structure of experience."³⁶ It is worthy of mention that even though the Marcuse/Whitehead connection is less often cited than Marcuse/Breton, it is no less intriguing, especially due to Whitehead's revived importance through contemporary "speculative realism," which has had significant influence on recent art discourse.³⁷

COMMON SENSE, COMMON NEEDS

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse examines the effects of technological rationality as playing out "on a very material and very real basis, namely on the basis of controlled and satisfied needs that in turn reproduce monopoly capitalism."³⁸ It is on this point that Marcuse argues that resistance can no longer be defined "simply as economic and political upheaval, as the establishment of a different mode of production and new institutions, but also and above all as a revolution in the prevailing structure of needs and the possibilities for their fulfillment."³⁹

Philosopher and educator Charles Reitz shrewdly writes that *One-Dimensional Man* perpetrated something like Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) on its readership of the time: "Marcuse's Brechtian discourse . . . models the new sensibility he is seeking to convey. *One-Dimensional Man*, as artwork, puts American audiences off, and opens us up, by exposing this nation's concealed and catastrophic contradictions."⁴⁰ Reitz is referring to Brecht's dramatic technique that claimed opposition to Aristotelian theater's *cathartic* "pathos of distance."⁴¹ Challenging the importance of Aristotle's dramatic elements of plot (or action), character, thought (or argument), diction, melody and spectacle,⁴² Brecht's *counter-cathartic*, *anti-Aristotelian* theater inverts these elements first by twisting spectacle into banality, then instrumentalizing plot, character, and thought so that the play "no longer in any way allowed [the spectator] to submit to an experience uncritically (and with practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play."⁴³ Brecht's politically motivated inversion of Aristotelian theater was influenced by the analogous move by Karl Marx to establish historical materialism in turning Hegel's idealist dialectic upside down, "or rather it was placed upon its feet instead of on its head, where it was standing before."⁴⁴ In Brecht—as in *One-Dimensional Man*—a constellation is created that connects *estrangement*, *alienation*, and *defamiliarization* in order to challenge dominant common sense.

In Marcusean terms, common sense is established and reinforced through technological rationality's hegemonic self-presentation as objective reality regulated and replicated by our institutions, technologies, and judicial and economic structures such that refutation is made to seem *irrational*.⁴⁵ The outcome

is that habitualized common sense also manipulates human needs. As such, at the root of Marcuse's analysis, technological rationality's "repressive transformation of the instincts becomes the biological constitution of the organism."⁴⁶ To counteract such external imprinting on the individual, Marcuse reiterates that the aesthetic dimension "assumes vital political importance in view of the unprecedented extent of social control perfected by advanced capitalism."⁴⁷ This argument is based on two main principles: humans are essentially caring beings and the aesthetic dimension is situated at the intersection of the imagination and critical reason.

Regarding the second of these principles, as Reitz observes, Marcuse is influenced by Brecht's strategy of putting the theatrical audience through a process of counter-cathartic alienation: "the alienation that is necessary to all understanding."⁴⁸ Counter-cathartic alienation resists the integrative and rationalized effects of catharsis that maintains repressive common sense. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse refers to this special form of alienation as "that which denotes man's relation to himself and to his work in capitalist society, the artistic alienation is the conscious transcendence of the alienated existence—a 'higher level' or mediated alienation."⁴⁹ First mentioned by Brecht in his "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936), the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* followed through on his earlier writings already referring to the importance of aesthetic strangeness (*befremden*).⁵⁰ As John Willett remarked, "This formula itself is a translation of [Viktor] Shklovsky's phrase *priem ostraneniija*, or 'device for making strange' and it can hardly be coincidence that it should have entered Brecht's vocabulary after his Moscow visit [1935]."⁵¹ Brecht reframes Shklovsky's

poetic estrangement device (see chapter 3) presented in the latter's essay "Art as Technique" (1917)⁵² to become a didactic theatrical one, although Brecht had already been feeling his way toward a notion of strategic self-consciousness through his Hegelian/Marxist use of "alienation" (*Entfremdung*) in the essay "Theatre for Pleasure of Theatre for Instruction" (1935). The second factor regarding fundamental human care is connected to the aesthetic dimension through a practice of attentiveness via the defamiliarization of habit.

HABIT AND RATIONALITY

As a useful counterpoint to Marcuse's argument for the socio-political function of alienation in terms of defamiliarization (or aesthetic strangeness), American Pragmatist⁵³ Charles Sanders Peirce once remarked that there is no "direct profit in going behind common sense—meaning by common sense those ideas and beliefs that man's situation absolutely forces upon him."⁵⁴ While not at all dismissing the role of scrutiny (since Peirce advocates the role of doubt and criticizes the closeminded consequences of fixation), the use of common sense, in Pragmatist terms, is meant to serve the purpose of efficaciousness.⁵⁵ Peirce argues that common sense has a connection to "concrete reasonableness," which combines "logical integrity with everyday reasoning [such that] reasonableness, made concrete, could be made common, as it would be instantiated in real and in regular patterns of reasoning."⁵⁶ Like Marcuse, instincts play a central role for Peirce in connection to common-sense familiarity—not instincts so much in terms of animal urges (where Charles Darwin was careful to add that even there "judgement or reason

often comes into play”⁵⁷), but as human *habits* that can be both inherited and developed. As Peirce axiomatically writes: “The whole function of thought is to produce habits of action . . . and for what a thing means is simply what habits it involves.”⁵⁸ Darwin, whose influence on Pragmatism was fundamental, explicitly links habits and instincts such that “for any habitual action to become inherited . . . then the resemblance between what originally was a habit and an instinct becomes so close as not to be distinguished.”⁵⁹ This blurring of instincts and habit is what Peirce also emphasizes, when he asserts that “instincts are conscious, determined in some way toward a ‘quasi-purpose’ [i.e., intention] and capable of being refined by training. . . . This set of features helps us to see how it is that reason can refine common-sense *qua* instinctual response, and how common sense—insofar as it is rooted in instinct—can be capable of refinement at all.”⁶⁰ As such, since instincts and habits are apt to be indistinguishable, they are equally susceptible to being rationalized, normalized, and naturalized as common sense.⁶¹

In agreement with Peirce’s understanding of the instincts in connection to habit, but in defiance of the primary Pragmatist goal of efficaciousness, Marcuse goes *behind* common sense to locate its life-world causes.⁶² In particular, Marcuse investigates how technological rationality “adjusts the rules of thought to the rules of control and domination.”⁶³ In exercising a central tenet of Critical Theory, as first outlined by Max Horkheimer in “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), Marcuse examines common sense as yet another form of “the mediation of the factual through the activity of society as a whole.”⁶⁴ The social research that grounds Critical Theory can be said to continue Marx’s inducement of “the reform of consciousness

[that] consists entirely in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in explaining its own actions to it. . . . In a *single word*: [it is] the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age.”⁶⁵ In this vein, Marcuse seeks the causes of habit and the sources of social behavior (or *ethos*) by analyzing things as they are; to expose what props things up from behind; to attend to prejudices and causes; and to see *beyond* things in the here and now, “for how can we possibly imagine that new relationships between men and things can ever arise if men continue to use the images and to speak the language of repression, exploitation and mystification.”⁶⁶ For Marcuse, this critical capacity of seeing behind and beyond common sense—which his critics have erroneously reduced to utopianism⁶⁷—connects radical sensibility to the aesthetic transformation of habitualized instincts. Marcuse’s analysis of the effects of technological rationality, its hidden causes, and its immanent counterforces foreshadows important works like Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, for instance, premised on human identity being “not only not natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright.”⁶⁸ With an equal emphasis on *action*, the fundamental difference between Peirce’s Pragmatism and Marcuse’s practical technique of defamiliarization is the former’s focus on utilizing common sense and the latter’s causal analysis of common sense itself.⁶⁹

RHETORIC AND RATIONALITY

In chapters 5 and 6 of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse names *apophantic logos* as maintaining the habitualizing circularity of

technological rationality.⁷⁰ This is a logic of judgments “not directly concerned with Being but rather with propositions on Being,” which creates “a restriction and a prejudice with respect to the task and scope of logic.”⁷¹ The implication of this reorientation, away from dialectical practice toward *rhetorical* persuasion, is that it presents an ideological reality based on arbitrary facticity and convention with “its own logic and its own truth.”⁷²

In an unpublished text by Marcuse titled “Apophantic Logos. Poetic Language: Language of Negation, Absence, Silence,”⁷³ he argues that Western society’s “universe of discourse,” which encompasses and establishes common sense, is caught in a feedback loop of “its own economic and political mechanisms.”⁷⁴ In this essay, Marcuse examines how technological rationality is upheld by apophantic logos that defines, constructs, and maintains its form (through the language used to describe it) in order to reveal the relative, contextual, and discursive habitualizations that are presented as objective truths. Within a philosophical context, the amorphous concept of *logos* has meant “an organizational principle of the universe” (Heraclitus), “the ability to give an account” (Plato), and, simply, “rationality” (Aristotle). In all these uses, logos interweaves our description of the reality of the world with the language we use to define it, including “words, images, gestures, tones.”⁷⁵ In its apophantic manifestation, logos has the capability of being a “totalitarian terror that cancels the distinction between subject and object, man and thing, between the universal and the particular.”⁷⁶ As analyzed in *One-Dimensional Man*, the apophantic logos that props up technological rationality reinforces “social habits of thought” from within “the language

of total administration”⁷⁷ establishing that *what is familiar is true*. In terms of art, Marcuse argues that apophantic logos has proven to even infiltrate the imagination by diminishing it and bringing it “down from the sublimated realm of the soul or the spirit or the inner man, and translated into operational terms and problems.”⁷⁸ Where Marcuse defines art in terms of its oppositional relationship with established common sense, anti-art is in harmony with it. (In chapter 2, I show how Marcuse uses the term *anti-art* in ways that are not only harmonic, but dissonant and microphonic.)

Thirty years prior to *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse created the template for this critique of the flattening of culture and society in his essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture” (1937). According to this argument, affirmative culture is presented as being operational (much like Peircean efficaciousness) instead of oppositional. It is ironic, on that account, that a critique of technological rationality’s apophantic logos finds inadvertent support in an obscure text on scientific and common-sense operationalism.⁷⁹ An ambiguous aside by the author Anatol Rapoport links technological rationality with the pseudo-science of Social Darwinism that naturalizes brute competition: “When the predominant view of society still stems from Herbert Spencer’s biological metaphor, ‘the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest,’ competition appears as a benefit selection process which assures that the best men win. Accordingly, interference with competition appears as interference with the ‘natural state of affairs.’”⁸⁰ Inherited by both neoliberalism and neoconservatism,⁸¹ we may blame the Social Darwinism of Spencer for the creed of “the survival of the fittest” (which was Spencer’s expression, not Charles Darwin’s)

in his *Principles of Biology* (1864) versus Darwin's proposition in *On the Origin of the Species* (1859) that "the mutual relations of organic beings are the most important."⁸² In contrast with Spencer's corrupted version, Marcuse's critique of technological rationality aligns with the overshadowed Darwinian principle that "civilization was characterized by the prevalence of *social instincts* capable of neutralizing the eliminatory aspects of natural selection, and thought that the feeling of *sympathy* was set to be extended indefinitely."⁸³

Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval call Spencer's industrialist reading of Darwin's evolutionary theory to corroborate laissez-faire capitalism "a turning point in the history of liberalism."⁸⁴ Especially influential in America and significant even in shaping the Pragmatist principle of efficaciousness, Spencer's Social Darwinism "placed a premium upon skill, intelligence, self-control, and the power to adapt through technological innovation, [which] stimulated human advancement and selected the best of each generation for survival."⁸⁵ His "scientific" worldview of right and wrong, "uniting under one generalization everything in nature from protozoa to politics,"⁸⁶ is founded on the liberal idea of the absence of interference with natural evolution and social progress. Spencer claims: "There cannot be more good done than that of letting social progress go on unhindered; yet an immensity of mischief may be done in the way of disturbing, and distorting and repressing, by policies carried out in pursuit of erroneous conceptions."⁸⁷ The function of the state, as a result, is solely "to insure that such freedom is not curbed."⁸⁸ As a by-product, Spencerian liberalism set a foundation for a range of right-wing individualist ideologies and white supremacy protectionists where he calls for "a return

to natural rights, setting up as an ethical standard the right of every man to do as he pleases, subject only to the condition that he does not infringe upon the equal rights of others.”⁸⁹ In effect, Spencer misconstrues Darwinism in his “System of Synthetic Philosophy” on a belief in natural self-interestedness, freedom for the powerful, and dogmatic survival of the fittest, which deplores any laws of socialist leaning (which includes caring mutual relations) that support welfare, public education, healthcare, housing regulations, state banking, and the like.⁹⁰ At its most basic, Spencer’s theory champions a social *and racial* elitism, particularly suited to a business ethic that decries, while failing to take systemic responsibility for, “the artificial [*sic*] preservation of those least able to take care of themselves.”⁹¹ To see how deeply engrained this Social Darwinist influence on neoliberal ideology has become, we need look no further than recent U.S. politics where neo-fascist corporate elites sell “civic nationalism”⁹² to disenfranchised populists as unveiled racism with the strong whiff of eugenics close behind.

DIALECTICAL AESTHETICS

Despite the significant barriers presented by the apophantic logos that maintains advanced capitalism, Marcuse insists that resistance is still possible: (1) through dialectical or “two-dimensional” *thought*, based on analysis and synthesis; and (2) through *practice* unfamiliar to “the established universe of discourse and action, needs and aspirations.”⁹³ Optimally, the two should not be disentangled in practice, since the first approach cultivates radical consciousness; the second, radical sensibility. Dialectical thought—or more accurately, dialectical

materialist thought—“retains the two-dimensionality of philosophical thought as critical, negative thinking.”⁹⁴ Dialectical thought challenges the one-dimensionality of the apophantic logos that “militates against the logic of contradictions” in favor of “modes of thought which sustain the established forms of life and the modes of behavior which reproduce and improve them [by providing] a different logic, a contradicting truth.”⁹⁵ The second approach refers to the aesthetic dimension that unites critical reason, imagination, and compassion.⁹⁶ Where dialectics provides a critical alternative to rhetoric (and apophantic logos), at the center of the aesthetic dimension is the technique of defamiliarization offering resistance to “one-dimensional thought and behavior”⁹⁷ through “non-conformistic artistic imagination.”⁹⁸ In particular, the aesthetic dimension helps “with all its affirmation, work as part of the liberating power of the negative and would help to free the mutilated unconscious and the mutilated consciousness which solidify the repressive Establishment.”⁹⁹

Marcuse identifies defamiliarization as the catalyst for aesthetic experience, which offers the direct means of fostering radical sensibility.¹⁰⁰ Defamiliarization is a transformative political technique that in Seyla Benhabib’s words “anticipates the radically new and the radically other.”¹⁰¹ Defamiliarization, therefore, demonstrates a freedom that intersects with “the universalization of the political [which] views emancipation as resolving the immanent contradictions of the existing order.”¹⁰² As a result, Marcuse’s aesthetic theory unifies a socially *normative* vision (i.e., expressing what should be) on the one hand—after Immanuel Kant’s pure judgment of taste wherein “the link between the object and human satisfaction is not contingent

on who does the judging”¹⁰³—and an individually *transgressive* one on the other—after Friedrich Schiller’s adaptation of Kant to propose an aesthetic attitude that contradicts the rationality of dominant norms. Alongside political and economic refusals, Marcuse’s emphasis on the aesthetic dimension, with defamiliarization at its center, demonstrates a *marxisant* approach, meaning it is “conversant with Marxism but not adhering to all aspects of the philosophy.”¹⁰⁴ This *post*-Marxist shift points to individual transformation (through aesthetics) as an alternative (but also complement) to an awakened working class as the historical agent of social change.¹⁰⁵ At the time of his writing, based on the socioeconomic integration of the working class in the West and its Sovietization in the East, “the moral to be extracted from Marcuse is that Marxism is no longer to be regarded as a body of dogma . . . but instead as a flexible method, open to revision and reorientation over the course of time and with exposure to new socio-cultural conditions.”¹⁰⁶

Gathering these threads, I have emphasized that the technique of defamiliarization is at the core of Marcuse’s aesthetics, which is embedded in his “philosophy of praxis,” which the philosopher Andrew Feenberg defines as “the form in which the actual contradictions of social life are raised to consciousness under the horizon of the given society.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, I have claimed that the technique of defamiliarization initiates practical dehabitualization in its development of a receptive capacity to ways of being outside the restrictive rationality of dominant common sense. Defamiliarization, therefore, makes a qualitative change to “primary experience” achieved through “an intensive counter-education” that repels “the instrumentalist rationality of capitalism.”¹⁰⁸ In *The Sovereignty*

of Art, Christoph Menke echoes this position also through the example of Surrealism's subversive aesthetic practices. In Menke's words: "At the margins of the (surrealist) avant-garde, it becomes clearer that art is not a utopian transcendence of reason, but rather represents a crisis for and a threat to reason . . . a crisis for our functioning discourses."¹⁰⁹ For Marcuse, absent of a (Surrealist) subversion of rationalized thought and behavior, art fails to deliver a defamiliarizing aesthetic experience and becomes a form of anti-art. The implications of this conclusion, as well as complications with the term itself, are addressed in chapter 2.

ANAMNESIS, SILENCE, SOCIAL-BEING

More abstrusely, regarding the premise that defamiliarization brings about a radical sensibility with transformative sociopolitical effects, Marcuse applies the concept of anamnesis, associated mainly with Plato's *Phaedo* (where we have "knowledge of the *eide* [Ideas or Forms] that we could not have acquired through the senses"¹¹⁰), in order to claim that the aesthetic dimension is a reawakening of repressed human instincts that embody *Eros*¹¹¹—the life instinct that encompasses love, compassion, and pleasure. *Eros* is located in the heart (*kardia*)¹¹² of instinctual care: "For the life instincts are opposed to the aggressive instincts: they contain, in fact, the possibilities and conditions necessary for an improvement of life, for a greater enjoyment of life, and indeed, not against others, but with them."¹¹³ While the Platonic concept of anamnesis entails its more esoteric pre-Socratic meaning of "rebirth,"¹¹⁴ for Marcuse

it would also be associated with the German *Sich erinnern*, meaning to remember or to recollect, which “literally means ‘to go into oneself.’ That is, in remembering one is *re-membered* or *re-collected* by returning to oneself from a state of externality, dispersion, or alienation.”¹¹⁵ Anamnesis, in other words, is a socially transformative response to capitalistic alienation (as self-estrangement), since “what [the aesthetic dimension] recalls and preserves in memory pertains to the future: images of a gratification that would dissolve the society which suppresses it.”¹¹⁶

Marcuse further connects anamnesis to *silence* in several senses of the word: as a state rich with latent potential; as a contemplative removal from the noisy effects of the everyday; and as a “medium of communication, the break with the familiar.”¹¹⁷ In his essay “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts,” silence is presented as the moment of acknowledging our repressed instincts: “It is as though the free space which the individual has at his disposal for his psychic processes has been greatly narrowed down; it is no longer possible for something like an individual psyche with its own demands and decisions to develop; the space is occupied by public, social forces.”¹¹⁸ In simple terms, silence presents an opportunity to listen, reflect and then act in opposition to dominant ethos. In its multiple meanings, silence provides an opening to indeterminate alternatives through “a return to an ‘immediate’ art, which responds to, and activates, not only to the intellect and a refined, ‘distilled,’ restricted sensibility, but also, and primarily, a ‘natural’ sense experience freed from the requirements of an obsolescent exploitative society. The search is for art forms that express the

experience of the body (and the 'soul'), not as vehicles of labor power and resignation, but as vehicles of liberation."¹¹⁹

In contrast, noise (also in its literal and metaphoric senses) is susceptible to producing repression through its association with *Thanatos*, "the companion of organized aggression."¹²⁰ Paradoxically, within the framework of technological rationality, noise that is normally the unwanted information in a system operates like a rhetorical and apophantic instrument of consent to common sense: an intentional signal of external persuasion.¹²¹ A group of Caribbean and European Surrealists referred to this effect in "Murderous Humanitarianism" (1932) when they castigated the hypocritical, liberal colonialist character who "preaches, doses, vaccinates, assassinates and (from himself) received absolution. With his psalms, his speeches, his guarantees of liberty, equality and fraternity, he seeks to drown out the noise of his machine-guns."¹²² Marcuse referred to this specious process as *repressive desublimation*, where *Thanatos* is held up harmoniously through an administrative form of catharsis, "the reinstatement of harmony by administrative decree, the banning of [critical] dissonance, discord, and atonality, [where] the cognitive function of art is 'brought in line.'"¹²³ What is cathartically produced and reproduced through technological rationality is "the ability to forget [as] the mental faculty which sustains submissiveness and renunciation."¹²⁴ Effectively, technological rationality's paradoxically harmonious noise displaces the instincts' true imaginative, erotic, and passionate source in care as the "starting point [*arche*] of life, movement, and sensation."¹²⁵

Returning to anamnesis, and anticipating its dismissal as a remnant of philosophical esotericism, Marcuse legitimizes it

as the leitmotif of the dialectical method, which always contains within each synthesis the recollection (anamnesis) of past positions.¹²⁶ Adorno offers a similar association, in the context of his “negative dialectics,” that every dialectical synthesis or “act of identification does violence to every single concept in the process. And the negation of the negation is in fact nothing other than the anamnesis, the recollection, of that violence.”¹²⁷ On the actuality of anamnesis, Marcuse summarizes his reasoning in *One-Dimensional Man*:

The Marxian vision recaptures the ancient theory of knowledge as *recollection*. . . . Recollection [*anamnesis*] thus is not remembrance of a Golden Past (which never existed), of childhood innocence, primitive man, et cetera. Recollection as epistemological faculty rather is synthesis, reassembling the bits and fragments which can be found in the distorted humanity and distorted nature. This recollected material has become the domain of the imagination, it has been sanctioned by the repressive societies in art, and as “poetic truth”—poetic truth only, and therefore not much good in the actual transformation of society. . . . They are given rather as the *horizon* of experience under which the immediately given forms of things appear as “negative,” as denial of their inherent possibilities, their truth. But in this sense, they are “innate” in man as *historical* being; they are themselves historical because the possibilities of liberation are always and everywhere historical possibilities. Imagination, *as knowledge*, retains the insoluble tension between idea and reality, the potential and the actual.¹²⁸

The placement of anamnesis within this framework of historical and dialectical materialism allows Marcuse to adapt it to the specific Marxian context of social-being (*gesellschaftlichen*

Menschen) which says we are collectively re-membered through liberated instincts realized intersubjectively as nonalienated social-being where “in his *consciousness of species* man confirms his real *social life*.”¹²⁹ For Marx, the concept of social-being, actualized in ideal form through communism “as the positive transcendence of private property as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real appropriation of the *human* essence by and for man”¹³⁰ is a transformation of Ludwig Feuerbach’s species-being (*Gattungswesen*) where “the reflecting individual carries the consciousness of the species within himself.”¹³¹ Marcuse argues that this “socio-ontological”¹³² application of anamnesis is ultimately a *bio-ontological* one—where the pre-conditions for liberation manifesting in individual needs are repressed and manipulated through external influence, then reinforced through habit. Hence, Marcuse believes that an aesthetic experience, defined as an encounter with defamiliarization, can recollect our essence of social-being. For Marcuse, social critique must also include a (Freudian) instinctual level, not just a (Marxian) sociohistorical one, since “the economic and political incorporation of the individuals into the hierarchical system of labor is accompanied by an instinctual process in which the human objects of domination reproduce their own oppression.”¹³³ Marcuse points to technological rationality’s influence even over the unconscious—foreshadowing his critique of Surrealism’s tendency to fetishize psychic automatism (*automatisme psychique*)—which left unacknowledged results in an internal “psychic Thermidorian”¹³⁴ tendency toward self-defeat, “a dynamic at work that internally negates possible liberation and gratification and that supports external forces of denial.”¹³⁵

HISTORY AND HABIT

Drawing upon Peirce's fellow (though famously adversarial) Pragmatist William James to compare Marcuse's practical sense of habitualized instincts, he declared that "habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed."¹³⁶ This Jamesian principle connects the degree of attentiveness to the strength of habit alongside a second principle that recognizes that habit decreases behavioral and cognitive friction, since "habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, mak[ing] them more accurate and diminishes fatigue."¹³⁷ Humans, according to James, possess a *plasticity* that is constituted by "a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once." That being so, plasticity is related to habit formation and conservation where "each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits."¹³⁸ James' idea of plasticity becomes a historical and sociopolitical factor in his argument for the "ethical implications of the law of habit." In its formation and conservation of behavior, the so-called law of habit is "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent."¹³⁹ As an instrument to maintain the status quo:

It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow; it protects us from invasion by the natives of

the desert and the frozen zone. It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing.¹⁴⁰

Where James underscores the historically *conservative* significance of the law of habit, in contrast, Marcuse identifies the habitualized instincts as the site of *revolutionary* potential (just as he sees redirected operationalism as producing new forms of social cohesion).¹⁴¹ For that reason, it is important to linger on some relevant concepts of history, since the distinctions between historicism, historicity, and historical materialism are significant in the way Marcuse sees how plasticity of the instincts practically affects social transformation. Where history, in general, is an account of the events and characters of the past, *historicism* holds that a retrospective interpretation of the past allows more objective insight than the past's direct experience. Among the many versions of historicism—from Aristotle's *On Interpretation* to Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*—Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutic critique of scientific reason (which was an influence on and later target of criticism by Martin Heidegger) proposed that a poetics of historical interpretation was able to represent human experience more fully allowing for a better determination of the future. Heideggerian *historicity*, in comparison, is particular to its existential treatment in *Being and Time*, where he presents the proper interpretation of history in connection to “authentic” Being (*Dasein*).¹⁴² Heidegger uses the hermeneutics of historicism to revise the past to fit an “unconcealment”¹⁴³ of an authentic present and to unfold this interpretation into the future.

Heideggerian historicity, therefore, is a metaphysics of Being that applies ontology to destiny: a “process of happening as a form of motility.”¹⁴⁴

In comparison, influenced by the historicist tradition that claims a scientific (not poetic) application, Marxist *historical materialism* is an analysis of the relations of production in the context of their implicit and explicit socioeconomic causes. Historical materialism “recognizes that the ostensible and also the really operating motives of men . . . are by no means the causes of historical events, that behind these motives are other motives, which have to be discovered from outside, from out of philosophical ideology, into history.”¹⁴⁵ In Engels’s words, as the inverse of Hegelian idealism, historical materialism contends that “matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely the highest product of matter.”¹⁴⁶ This position is a development from the “old materialism” (says Engels of Feuerbach) that remains essentially idealist in its moralistically pragmatic judgment of “everything according to the motives of the action.”¹⁴⁷ Regarding human activity this view only provides a superficial picture, which “takes the ideal driving forces which operate there as ultimate causes.”¹⁴⁸ In contrast, the “new materialism” (of Marx and Engels) investigates the external forces behind human will to find “what are the driving forces of these driving forces.”¹⁴⁹ Historical materialism, moreover, is a rejection of the (Hegelian) idealist means to the obtainment of truth—which impossibly requires “an absolute break with sensuous consciousness”¹⁵⁰—in favor of identifying, in Engels’s words, “the driving forces which—consciously or unconsciously, and indeed very often unconsciously—lie behind the motives of men in their historical actions and which

constitute the real ultimate driving forces of history.”¹⁵¹ From the historical materialist standpoint, Hegel’s blind spot was his failure to acknowledge his own self-consciousness (*Selbstbewußtsein*) as also including sensuous consciousness (as a *body* in specific circumstances).¹⁵²

Ultimately, a conflation of these poetic and philosophical views of history—comprised of Heideggerian historicism and Marxist historical materialism—form Marcuse’s position that “a qualitative change must occur . . . in the infrastructure of man (itself a dimension of the infrastructure of society).”¹⁵³ The consequence is that Marcuse’s idea of history is a fusion of approaches that share a “method of continuous and radical concreteness . . . able to grasp appropriately the historicity of human existence.”¹⁵⁴ As Richard Wolin and John Abromeit write in their introduction to *Heideggerian Marxism*: “In Marcuse’s view it seemed clear that ‘historicity’ represented the essential link between existentialism and historical materialism.”¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Marcuse’s conflated concept of history retains the problem of Heideggerian historicist grasping of Being over the lived history of beings.¹⁵⁶ The result is that if not well grounded in a historical materialist consciousness and lived bodily experience, historicity’s overreaching conclusions, as evidenced by Heidegger’s heinous and unapologetic embrace of Nazism, based on ontological pretensions, are just a “specious metaphysical obfuscation.”¹⁵⁷

PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

In part, I believe Marcuse’s conflated notion of history was a factor in his inability to communicate his aesthetic theory

persuasively. Where Marcuse advocated that “we have to direct our attention to the historical character of art . . . art as such, not only its various styles and forms, [but as] a historical phenomenon,”¹⁵⁸ in his 1967 lecture at the School of Visual Arts, he confusingly shifts away from art emerging from within concrete historical circumstances to abstract notions of aesthetic form.¹⁵⁹ Despite what members of his SVA audience would have accepted as *One-Dimensional Man*’s effective means of articulating “what young radicals felt was wrong with society,”¹⁶⁰ his lecture tends toward the use of abstract historicist terms, compromising the practical aesthetic technique of defamiliarization. As a result, Marcuse’s SVA lecture was seen to have failed on the levels of applicability and relevance. Not only did Marcuse seem to ambiguously endorse *and* condemn anti-art, but also he defaults to speaking of art “mutatis mutandis”¹⁶¹ instead of with specific reference to any of the contemporary practices that were characteristic of artistic radicality. As a result, Marcuse turns his SVA audience off. From the perspective of the artistic avant-garde, his reliance on historicity was dismissed for what was received as an anachronistic Eurocentrism and an abstract perspective on art production, instead of the real struggle of artists within their existing environments.¹⁶² For instance, as recalled by Fluxus artist Henry Flynt, Ben Morea (the founder of the anarchist art “street gang with analysis” Black Mask) aggressively challenged Marcuse during the question period after the SVA lecture with criticisms of the philosopher’s ineffectual aesthetic theory removed from actual pressing sociopolitical concerns.¹⁶³

In order to defend the practical elements of Marcuse’s aesthetics via defamiliarization it is necessary to address not only

the unfair assessments of anachronism and irrationalism by his art world critics (see “Coda: Misreading Marcuse’s Aesthetics”), but also the inaccurate conclusions by his political adherents who downplayed or dismissed his position regarding the practical effects of aesthetic transformation. As first principle—it must be stressed—Marcuse’s application of the aesthetic dimension to political action is one that he insisted is *limited*. Unequivocally, Marcuse asserts that beyond art’s ability to reconnect with repressed Eros—the “libidinal energy, in struggle with aggressive energy, striving for the intensification, gratification, and unification of life and the life environment”¹⁶⁴—the political responsibility of the artist *as artist* ends.

Art can do nothing to prevent the ascent of barbarism—it cannot by itself keep open its own domain in and against society. For its own preservation and development, art depends on the struggle for the abolition of the social system which generates barbarism as its own potential stage: potential form of its progress. The fate of art remains linked to that of the revolution. In this sense, it is indeed an internal exigency of art which drives the artist to the streets—to fight for the Commune, for the Bolshevik revolution, for the German revolution of 1918, for the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, for all revolutions which have the historical chance of liberation. But in doing so he leaves the universe of art and enters the larger universe of which art remains an antagonist part: that of radical practice.¹⁶⁵

This position is central to Marcuse’s aesthetics, which is central to his politics, so it must be repeated: The radical, antagonistic, *internal exigency* of art prepares the artist for direct action beyond art. While similar to Adorno’s position that

“all that [the artist] is able to do, and perhaps on the verge of despair, is contradict the enchained society through unchained art,”¹⁶⁶ Marcuse argues in practical terms that “the rest is not up to the artist. The realization, the real change which would free men and things, remains the task of political action; the artist participates not as artist.”¹⁶⁷ On the surface, this may seem paradoxical, especially considering Marcuse’s reputation for endorsing the New Left’s credo: “From moral outrage to radical vision.”¹⁶⁸ The foundation of Marcuse’s position on the relationship between aesthetics and political praxis, however, is consistent and clear: the aesthetic dimension is *potentially* political through its ability to open up and radicalize our sensibility and attentiveness. Summarized in “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” he writes: “Art discovers that there are *things*; things and not mere fragments and parts of matter to be handled and used up arbitrarily, but ‘things in themselves’; things which ‘want’ something, which suffer, and which lend themselves to the domain of Form, that is to say, things that are inherently ‘aesthetic.’ Thus art discovers and liberates the domain of sensuous Form, the pleasure of sensibility, as against the false, the formless and the ugly in perception which is repressive of the truth and power of sensibility.”¹⁶⁹

AESTHETICS AS ANALOGOUS POLITICS?

Even though Marcuse’s SVA lecture tends toward historicity with detrimental results, it is equally indicative of his fundamental belief in the general socio- and bio-ontological effects that the aesthetic dimension has on instinctual transformation.

Despite this fact, Marcuse's SVA audience was left with the impression that his aesthetic theory was a reiteration of Romantic irrationalities and platitudes (such as "freedom of appearance is one with beauty")¹⁷⁰ that resulted in only impractically *analogous* associations between art and politics. I argue this is incorrect based on his advocacy for the *technique* of defamiliarization (which is also overlooked in Schiller).¹⁷¹ Marcuse's association with Romanticism—beyond Marcuse's admiration of Schiller or through his own droll self-confession as "an absolutely incurable and sentimental romantic"¹⁷²—is true however in the specific sense of his adherence to artistic alienation as something intentionally incompatible with the established social order. Similar criticisms of Whitehead for philosophical "irrationalism" (in particular, by the philosopher and neoliberal proponent Karl Popper)¹⁷³ and Breton for aesthetico-political "irrationalism" (by the French Communist Party)¹⁷⁴ are also directed at Marcuse for his "irrational" aesthetics that are seen as relying on a merely analogous connection between art and politics, instead of a practical and realistic one.

At root, these criticisms stem from a deeply embedded belief that art is categorically separate from politics and any claims to the contrary can only be excusable through analogy. This antagonism is established in the history of European aesthetics—established in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750–1758)—that separates art and the everyday according to formal, technical, and experiential limits. For Baumgarten, aesthetics is "the science of knowing the beautiful" (which was to be established separately alongside *logic*), yet with his novel contribution that "beauty no longer resided in the object contemplated but in the mind of the observer."¹⁷⁵

Baumgarten further separates aesthetics from ethics because the former relies on uncertainty arrived at through emotions and sensations instead of the precise concepts of reason. Pithily, for Baumgarten, a poem's separation from everyday uncertainty is captured in his phrase *oratio perfecta sensitive*: "sensuously complete speech." Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* thereafter take up Baumgarten's categorical separations to reestablish a relationship between reason (in which logic is only one part) and sensibility (aesthetics) mediated by a new ethics of the beautiful (which encompasses "plenitude, magnitude, truth, clarity, certitude and a lively movement or living power of cognition and 'unity within diversity' in the work of art"¹⁷⁶) only able to *analogously* relate to everyday experience. Founded on Baumgarten's original arguments, Schiller amplifies the relationship between aesthetics and analogous politics in his second equation of beauty with freedom, where "the idea of moral beauty is essentially metaphorical, based upon but not reducible to physical beauty."¹⁷⁷ Due to this metaphorical oversight, it is evident why Marcuse favors the mediating role that Schiller gives to aesthetics to unite reason (concerning the limits of thought) and the senses (concerning the limits of perception).¹⁷⁸ As applied by Marcuse, the capacity of Schiller's mediating aesthetics to both form and transform habit seems surprisingly pragmatic and material.¹⁷⁹ A crucial passage in Schiller's "Twentieth Letter" in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* reinforces this assessment: "The mind passes from sensation to thought through a middle disposition in which sensuousness and reason cancel each other out [*gegenseitig aufheben*]. This middle disposition, in which our nature is constrained neither physically nor morally and yet is active

in both ways, preeminently deserves to be called a free disposition; and if we call the condition of sensuous determination the physical, and that of rational determination the logical and moral, we must call this condition of real and active determinacy the *aesthetic*.”¹⁸⁰ From the outset, however, the argument of analogy—which claims that “the moral and aesthetic realms *seem to be like* one another, or that sensible movements *appear* to be manifestations of freedom”¹⁸¹ only because one believes oneself to be free via a tenuous “aesthetic attitude to the existing world”¹⁸²—has restricted discussions on the actual and practical effects of artistic defamiliarization.¹⁸³ Indeed, Marcuse extracts from Schiller his remorse over the loss of a human communal spirit,¹⁸⁴ and emphasizes that the production of radical sensibility via the technique of defamiliarization leads back toward “a vital, biological drive for liberation, and with a consciousness capable of breaking through the material as well as ideological veil of the affluent society.”¹⁸⁵

Based on perceived metaphoric overreach,¹⁸⁶ critics have remained skeptical about Marcuse’s claim for the sociopolitical effects of the aesthetic dimension viewing it as a category mistake. Where Marcuse argues that radical sensibility can “show the way back to a unified and total humanity,”¹⁸⁷ his critics insist this way back from aesthetics to the everyday is politically ineffective reserved as it is to mere analogy. Andrew Feenberg, for instance, argues: “This attempt to employ a non-formalistic intuitive understanding modeled on aesthetic principles is unsuccessful. Outside the sphere of actual artistic production, it ceases to be a true subject of practice.”¹⁸⁸ Further, Feenberg argues that the aesthetic dimension limits the “‘action’ of the subject . . . to yet another form of contemplation, not

calculating reason, but aesthetic appreciation.”¹⁸⁹ For Feenberg, this insolubility is due to the fact that “artistic practice . . . fails because it has so little impact on the social world that is founded for it.”¹⁹⁰ Charles Reitz offers a similarly skeptical critique of the actual social effectiveness of aesthetics by stressing Marcuse’s “catastrophic pseudodialectic of art and life” that “admits only of a polar reciprocity or circularity; hence, the sweeping oscillation between the art-against-alienation thesis and the art-as-alienation position.”¹⁹¹ Feenberg and Reitz’s views of the dubious practical effects of the aesthetic dimension echo the earlier dismissals of the Marxist critic Paul Mattick whose critique of Marcuse continued to rely heavily on a revolutionary “labor metaphysic” (as C. Wright Mills phrased it in “Letter to the New Left”)¹⁹² initiated by the disaffected working class.¹⁹³ Although sharing Marcuse’s fight for the attainment of a “human society”¹⁹⁴—that is, wanting the end of repressive capitalist values¹⁹⁵—Mattick, Feenberg, and Reitz doubt any actual intersection of aesthetics and politics. Martin Jay, though critical of Marcuse’s “totalizing notion of the ‘Great Refusal’ as a kind of aesthetic metapolitics,”¹⁹⁶ comes closer to capturing Marcuse’s vision “between the aesthetic and practical spheres . . . as a noncolonizing interpenetration that may be re-established on the level of everyday experience.”¹⁹⁷

The partial though significant influence of Schiller on Marcuse has marked him as a Schillerean on the whole. The criticism of Marcuse for committing the same category mistake as Schiller is unwarranted, since Marcuse’s aesthetic theory fundamentally does *not* connect “the moral and aesthetic realms, the noumenal and phenomenal domains, simply in virtue of an analogy, or purely on the basis of metaphor.”¹⁹⁸

On the contrary, Marcuse argues that art has a *practical* relationship to politics through defamiliarization's offering an antagonistic "counterimage of what occurs in social reality"¹⁹⁹ to produce indirect and indeterminate—which is not the same as analogous—effects on praxis. This practical link through defamiliarization confronts "dehumanization at the place of entrance, there where the false consciousness takes form (or rather: is systematically formed) [by] stopping the words and images which feed this consciousness."²⁰⁰

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